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**Book Review: A History of Japanese Political Thought, 1600-1901, by
Watanabe Hiroshi. Tokyo : International House of Japan**

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A History of Japanese Political Thought, 1600-1901, by Watanabe Hiroshi. Tokyo: International House of Japan.

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Watanabe Hiroshi's book *A History of Japanese Political Thought, 1600-1901* is the fruit of more than forty years of research and teaching on early modern Japanese political thought. It basically grew out of Watanabe's lectures for undergraduates at the University of Tokyo and although it is based on academic research undertaken for many years, it mainly addresses the interested but non-specialist reader. Watanabe's book appeared 2010 in Japanese, the excellent English translation by David Noble was published two years later. The book is of the highest value, especially for the Western reader as it is one of the few publications in Western languages that gives a broad and balanced overview of the fascinating political discourse that proceeded from Confucian ideas and developed in Japan from the seventeenth century on until it came to an end at the turn of the twentieth century when Western thought almost completely superseded the Confucian tradition.

In twenty-two chapters Watanabe presents the main protagonists and topics of Japanese political thought from 1600 to 1901. The choice of this period of time is unusual as it does not follow the common historical periodization that starts from 1600 or 1603 and ends in 1868, making up the so-called Edo- or Tokugawa-period. Watanabe chooses to go beyond this period and cover three entire centuries because he is mainly interested in the political discourse inspired by Confucianism, and this influence can be felt, or so Watanabe argues, until 1901 when two of its last partisans, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) and Nakae Chōmin (1847–1901), died. The first six chapters introduce the reader to Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism in China and to the political and intellectual situation in Japan at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Watanabe makes clear that although some political leaders including the first shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu showed interest in Confucian thinking, it took a lot of effort and time until Confucianism gained a foothold in Japanese society and started to dominate the political discourse. Most chapters in the middle part of the book focus on one political thinker and present his life, work, and central ideas. The choice of authors to whom a chapter is dedicated is quite conventional, including Itō Jinsai (1627–1705), Arai Hakuseki (1657–1725), Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728) and Andō Shōeki (1703–1762), whose work is also partly translated into Western languages. Kaiho Seiryō (1755–1817) is a less discussed author, but Watanabe shows that some of his innovative ideas became prominent with later and more popular authors like Fukuzawa Yukichi. Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) is the only Non-Confucian thinker presented in the book. The book therefore cannot, and actually does not, claim to present a complete history of Japanese political thought from 1600 to 1901 due to this absence of other Kokugaku, Shintō, or Buddhist thinkers. Apart from the big names, Watanabe also frequently quotes many less prominent voices of other Confucians, conservative samurai, Christians, Western visitors, adherents of Dutch Learning etc. and thereby presents the intellectual landscape of Tokugawa Japan in all its variety and heterogeneity. Some chapters, especially those in the last third of the book, focus on topics and not on a specific author and deal, for example, with peasant protests, sexuality, and Japanese perceptions of the West. The last two chapters present the ideas of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nakae Chōmin and are followed by a short afterword. Watanabe does not draw a conclusion from his presentations, nor does he follow a thread that runs through all the chapters. Most chapters can therefore also be read separately. The result is not a mere potpourri, however, but a diverse and realistic picture of the continuities and discontinuities of Japan's political discourse in the early modern period.

A Western reader who is unacquainted with Japan's political and intellectual history in the early modern period will notice that Watanabe writes for Japanese readers and therefore presupposes some knowledge of Japan's history. Such readers may therefore profit from having a look at Japanese history books while reading Watanabe. In general, the book is very readable, however, avoiding technical jargon and theoretical discussions. It might therefore be called popular, but surely not populist. On the contrary, Watanabe fights against common prejudices in Japan and in the West. He stresses, for example, that most real samurai had not much in common with the honorable warriors that we know from martial arts movies or from the *bushidō* literature. The usually illiterate and brutal samurai of the Warring States period (1467–1568) who fought for changing lords in order to make a name for themselves fell into an identity crisis when the long period of peace of the Tokugawa period began. Some of them managed to become government officials, teachers, or doctors, but the fate of the class of low-ranking samurai as a whole was a constant material and spiritual decay. Watanabe furthermore frequently compares the Japanese situation with the situation in China, in Korea, and in some Western countries. He shows how important developments in Japan such as the rise of a national identity, the opening of the country to foreigners in 1853, and the restoration of the emperor as the head of state in 1868 were also triggered by public discussions in Japan that grew out of the keen observation of the political, intellectual, and technical developments in these foreign countries. He thus shows how international Japan's early modern political and

intellectual history was already, in spite of the country's self-imposed seclusion. Finally, Watanabe unmask the attempts to depict the political leaders of the Meiji Restoration—or “Meiji Revolution” as Watanabe prefers to call it—as wise statesmen who systematically unified and modernized the country in order to prevent colonization by Western powers. He rather makes clear that the restoration was an anarchical process with unforeseen results and frequent changes of mind of all its protagonists.

Watanabe not only reacts to common popular misconceptions about Japan's intellectual history. His choice of topics and arguments also reflects the academic discussion in contemporary Japan about the political thought in Japan's early modern period as well as about historiography and political theory in general. Watanabe obviously grapples with the theories of his teacher Maruyama Masao (1914–1996) who described the Tokugawa society as an ideal breeding ground for Confucian thought and saw Ogyū Sorai as a forerunner of Japan's modernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Watanabe also shares many ideas with his colleague at Tokyo University Bitō Masahide (1926–2013), for example, about the importance of the household system—the so-called *ie*-system—for Japan's society in the Tokugawa period. Watanabe does not mention these influences or other secondary sources at any point of his book, however. This is especially deplorable for the Western reader who wants to learn more about the Japanese history of political thought and its scientific reflection in contemporary Japan.

It is, finally, a great merit of Watanabe's book that he shows much sympathy for his authors. It is the declared aim of the book to present the Tokugawa thinkers “in proper proportion and perspective as people much like ourselves, struggling with the various problems and difficulties of coexisting with the diversity of other humans in the world” (p. 7). He explains the historical and social background for diverse strands of political thought and tries his best to make the ideas and arguments of all his authors comprehensible. Watanabe does not hide his own preferences, however, and reveals his commitment to the universal value of equality, justice, and freedom. His universalist stance sometimes leads to a somewhat ahistorical perspective, especially when he deals with ancient Chinese thinkers such as Confucius or Mencius. These thinkers and their period are not the topic of his book, however, and are mainly used as illustrations of Watanabe's central claim that people of all places and times had similar problems in organizing society and that the proposed solutions to these problems that seem to be completely disparate at first glance can be seen to share a common ground after more careful analysis. Watanabe can therefore be understood as continuing the work of two of his preferred authors, Fukuzawa Yukichi and Naka Chōmin, in trying to show that political thinkers in the East and in the West are actually only proposing different expressions of the same universal reason and justice. However a reader might think about this project, she cannot but profit from Watanabe's clear and fresh presentation, from all the information provided in the book and from its balanced and careful argumentation. The book is therefore highly recommendable for everybody interested in Japan's history and political thought.